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ABSTRACT

This module is designed to enhance employees' problem-solving abilities by improving their communication skills. The module, which is designed to be presented by a single facilitator in six weekly sessions, focuses on three areas of communication: listening, discussing, and acting. Covered in the module sessions are the role of communication and problem solving in the workplace and the following steps of the problem-solving process: identifying the problem, analyzing it, generating and selecting potential solutions, planning and implementing the solution, and evaluating the solution. Each session outline includes an objective, list of supplemental materials required, session time, activity guidelines, and facilitator's notes. Four handouts are also included. A five-page hands-on sample of an authentic workplace problem is provided along with the problem-solving steps employees took to solve it. A glossary of problem-solving terms and a list of recommended resources conclude the module. (MN)

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COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING IN THE WORKPLACE

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COMMUNICATION AND PROBLEM-SOLVING IN THE WORKPLACE

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INTRODUCTION TO THE WORKPLACE LITERACY PROJECT

This module was developed by educators from Emily Griffith Opportunity School as part of a National Workplace Education grant funded by the U.S. Department of Education. A cooperative effort between the business and education communities, the program was designed specifically to enhance employees' literacy skills.

Direct benefits to the workforce include improved morale and motivation, self-esteem, team work, and promotional opportunities.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of our partners. In addition we recognize all of the students who participated in classes and who provided us with invaluable feedback for strengthening future classes.

We hope partnerships such as these will provide the catalyst for developing new or continued on-site educational opportunities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
Introduction	1
Communications Overview	2-3
Identifying and Selecting a Problem	4-6
Analyzing the Problem	7-8
Generating and Selecting a Potential Solution(s)	9-10
Planning and Implementing the Solution	11-12
Evaluating the Solution	13
Handout I.1	14
Handout II.1	15
Handout II.2	16
Handout III.1	17
Sample Proposal for Worksite Problem-Solution	18-23
Glossary of Problem-Solving Terms	24-26
Resources	27

PROBLEM-SOLVING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

INTRODUCTION

What is good communication? How does problem-solving affect communications? Good communication involves active listening, seeing another person's point of view, patience, self-control, good body language, and a caring attitude. The building blocks to problem-solving also include communicating effectively.

This problem-solving module is based upon three areas of communication: listening, discussing, and acting. Both the activities and the facilitator's notes are easy to follow, and activities are enhanced by discussion, role-playing, note taking, and brainstorming. They are designed to help people understand communication better and to give them more control over their own communication and problem-solving abilities.

Designed to be presented by a single facilitator in a six-week format, the module is easily adaptable to co-facilitators and/or an extended or abbreviated format.

In addition the module includes a five-page hands-on sample of an authentic workplace problem and the problem-solving steps employees took to solve it. Readers may want to use this as a guide for organizing their own workplace problem-solution.

SESSION 1

COMMUNICATIONS OVERVIEW

Objective: After completing this lesson, learners will define communication and problem-solving as applied to the workplace. They will understand the communication model and how it affects the problem-solving process.

Supplemental Materials: Flipchart or transparency
Handout I.1 (Communication Model)

Time: 2 hours

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Learners individually jot down ideas.	What is communication in the workplace?
Group discusses their answers.	
Learners individually jot down ideas.	What is problem-solving in the workplace?
Group discusses their answers.	

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Handout I.1 (Communication Model)	Show communication model of listening, discussing, and acting. Define terms of each and how they interconnect.
Small group activity.	Learners determine via writing, how understanding the communication model affects the problem-solving process.

SESSION II

IDENTIFYING AND SELECTING A PROBLEM

Objective: After completing this lesson, learners will initiate the problem-solving process, including identifying and selecting a problem to solve.

Supplemental Materials:
Handout II.1 (Steps in the Problem-Solving Process)
Handout II.2 (Consensus Decision Making)
Flip chart and markers

Time: 2 hours

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Whole group brainstorms. Learners use board or flipchart to compile list based on learners' responses.	What are common workplace problems/situations that often cause difficulties at work?

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Handout II.1 (Steps in the problem-solving process) Small group activity: Learners identify and select a problem to solve for this module.	Discuss steps for problem-solving: > Identifying and selecting the problem > Analyzing the problem > Generating and selecting a potential solution > Planning and presenting the solution > Implementing and evaluating the solution
Handout II.2 (Consensus Decision Making) Whole group discusses.	Discuss meaning of consensus decision making: > 100% commitment to a decision > Learners freely offer opinions and ideas > Learners express and explore disagreements > Learners clarify underlying assumptions
Brainstorm possible resources for information.	After identifying and selecting a problem, decide what kinds of information are needed to have adequate information about the selected problem.

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Small group activity: Each learner will select part of the problem to research.	Assignment: In small group, each learner will be responsible for part of the research.

SESSION III

ANALYZING THE PROBLEM

Objective: After completing this lesson, learners will agree upon the problem, determine its important components, plan effective strategies, and identify a root cause.

Supplemental Materials: Flip chart and markers
Handout III.1 (Flowcharting Guidelines)

Time: 2 hours

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Small group activity: Have learners share the information they have gathered.	Review the previous steps.
Small group activity: Group selects a recorder to analyze information. Whole group activity: Make large chart of information analysis.	Decide if there is critical information missing; what information is relevant/irrelevant.

Activity	Facilitator's Notes
Small group activity: Group decides on a method to visualize the causes of the problem using Handout III.1 as a resource.	Instruct groups to brainstorm all the possible causes of the problem & then determine the root cause. Encourage learners to draw diagrams, flow charts, etc. to make the process more visual.
Whole group activity: Share possible root causes; come to a consensus.	Whole group accepts root cause of the problem.

SESSION IV

GENERATING & SELECTING A POTENTIAL SOLUTION(S)

Objective: After completing this lesson, learners will determine which of their solutions will and will not work.

Supplemental Materials: Flip chart and markers
Board or transparency

Time: 2 hours

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Large group is divided into three teams. Each team receives a piece of flipchart paper, markers, and tape. Team designates a "recorder" to write down solutions.	Learners discuss possible solutions to selected problem. (Set time limit.)
Each team's paper is displayed on wall. Learners review all sheets with solutions.	All potential solutions are "brought to the table" for review.

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Each team chooses best possible solution denoted by putting a circle around the solution.	Learners narrow choices by eliminating duplications. Learners include pros and cons of each team's final solution.
Group discussion	One final solution is agreed upon by entire group.

SESSION V:

PLANNING & IMPLEMENTING THE SOLUTION

Objective: After completing this lesson, learners will be able to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the potential solutions they have selected (and get approval from management if necessary).

Supplemental Materials: Transparencies and markers
Post-it notes and flipchart paper

Time: 3 hours

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Small group in-basket activity: Learners in each group write one part of the solution on a post-it note. As a small group, arrange post-it notes in most logical order on flipchart.	Break down suggested solution(s) into parts.
Whole group discusses final logical arrangement.	Come to consensus on planning the solution.
With a partner, use a transparency to organize the proposed steps for implementing the solution.	Write an implementation proposal.

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Facilitator shows each team's proposal on transparency. Team clarifies any questions whole group may have.	Decide upon the most effective implementation proposal.
	Learners come to consensus on implementing the solution.

SESSION VI:

EVALUATING THE SOLUTION

Objective: After learners have implemented the solution, they will meet to discuss why the solution/implementation did or didn't work.

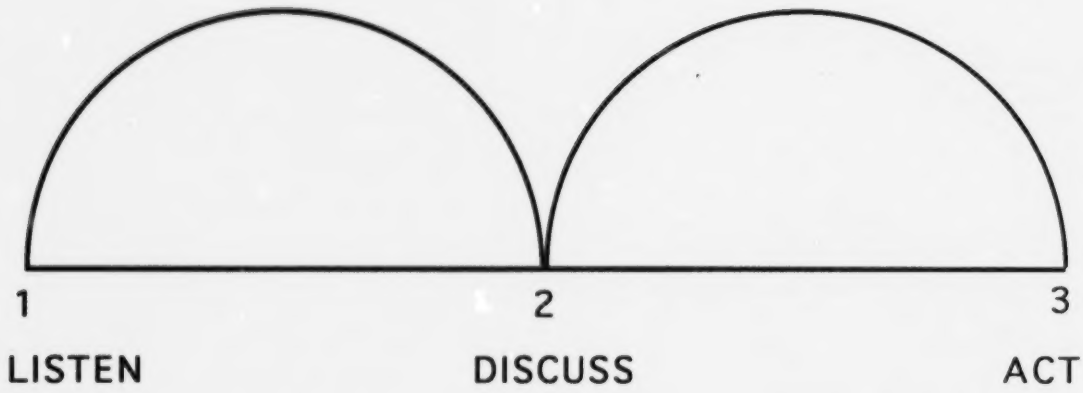
Supplemental Materials: Transparencies and markers

Time: 1 hour

ACTIVITY	Facilitator's Notes
Group brainstorms a list of what did and didn't work about solution or implementation. Facilitator lists group's responses on overhead.	Group determines whether solution was effective.
	Depending on responses learners can select any of the problem-solving strategies they have used in this module to improve their problem-solving abilities.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

COMMUNICATION MODEL



STEPS IN THE PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS

> Identifying and Selecting Problem

> Analyzing the Problem

> Generating and Selecting a Potential Solution

> Planning and Presenting the Solution

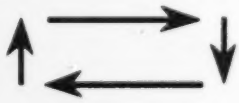
> Implementing and Evaluating the Solution

CONSENSUS DECISION MAKING

IS	IS NOT
100% **commitment** to a decision	100% **agreement**
Occurs when team members:	Does not occur because team members:
> Freely offer opinions and knowledge	> Hold back ideas for fear of rejection and/or ridicule
> Express and explore disagreements	> Withhold information or misinform group on critical points
> Question validity of all available information	> Force a decision before all available information has been discussed and analyzed

FLOWCHARTING GUIDELINES

Flowcharting Symbols

Activity Symbol	The activity symbol is a square that indicates an activity. Write a brief description of the activity in the square.
Boundary Symbol	The boundary symbol is a rounded rectangle that marks the beginning or the end of a process. Write "Begin" in the rounded rectangle to indicate the beginning of the process or "End" to indicate the end of a process.
Decision Symbol	The decision symbol is a diamond that indicates a decision point from which the process branches into two or more paths. The path taken depends on the answer to the question that is written in the diamond. Each path is labeled in response to the question in the diamond, i.e., write "Yes" or "No."
 Flow Line	The flow line represents the path that connects parts of the process, i.e., activities and decisions. The arrowhead on the flow line indicates the direction of the process flow.

SAMPLE PROPOSAL

FOR

WORKSITE PROBLEM-SOLUTION

SUGGESTION BOX

1. Purpose: Used as a communication tool in communicating with management on ways of improvement (work smarter not harder.)

2. Benefits:
   a. Organization
   b. Employees
   c. Customer Service

3. Implementation:
   a. Who's responsible? (employee committee separate from EAC)
   b. Approval
   c. Follow-up and acknowledgment
   d. Action

4. Evaluation

5. Format/Procedures

* Committee separate from Employee Advisory Committee

Participation -- volunteer

Stability and continuity (6 month commitment from each member). If member has to leave, committee needs to find his/her own replacement.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR SUGGESTION IMPLEMENTATION

The suggestion box is emptied and good suggestions are reviewed by the committee. "Thank you for your suggestion" memo or card is sent to the submitter. The committee determines if a good suggestion has the potential to be implemented using the following steps:

STEP 1

Committee discussion and hearing of verbal report by submitter when applicable.

STEP 2

Pro and con list developed by committee. An Implementation Schedule is developed when feasible.

STEP 3

Summary of Suggestion, Implementation Schedule, and approval request submitted to departmental Supervisor directly affected by potential change.

STEP 4

Approval received and supervisor's comments reviewed by committee. Changes and recommendations by the supervisor regarding the suggestion are reviewed and revisions (when applicable) are sent back out to the supervisor.

STEP 5

Revised Summary of Suggestion, Implementation Schedule, and approval request submitted to departmental manager directly affected by potential change. A copy of these forms is also sent to the Director of Patient Financial Services.

STEP 6

The committee will make a final review of approved suggestion to determine when it will go into effect and who will be responsible for its implementation.

Submitter will be apprised of suggestion progress as well as suggestion outcome.

IMPLEMENTATION SCHEDULE

Suggestion Title: _____

Date of Suggestion: _____

Submitter: _____

Do you recommend that this suggestion be:

1 | **Rejected (please explain).**
2 | **Revised and resubmitted to you.**
3 | **Forwarded to your manager and/or director.**

Explanation for rejection: _____

_____

_____

Supervisor's comments and recommendations to the Suggestion Committee regarding this suggestion:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

SUGGESTION FORM

Please Print	Last Name	First Name	Dept.	Extension
Your name (optional)				
Name(s) of your associates involved in contributing to this suggestion (optional).				

This suggestion if implemented, would directly improve:

1	Administration	6	Quality of Service
2	Cost Control	7	Resource Availability
3	Customer Satisfaction	8	Resource Efficiency
4	Employee Satisfaction	9	Safety
5	Esthetics	10	Other (explain)

Please describe your suggestion and solution. Please be *specific*.

Include in your suggestion: Main Reason, Supporting Reasons (if any), Action to be Taken.

Thank you for your input. The committee will review your suggestion and will inform you of its outcome.

GLOSSARY OF PROBLEM-SOLVING TERMS

ACTING: doing something

BRAINSTORMING: spontaneous thinking to explore an idea or problem

CLARIFYING: asking insightful questions to better understand a situation

CLOSED QUESTION: a question that is answered by "yes" or "no"

COMMUNICATION: an exchange of information, thoughts, or feelings -- exchange may be verbal, non-verbal (body language) or written

CONFLICT: the result of different views or beliefs

CONFRONTATION: dealing with a problem assertively

CONSENSUS: general agreement involving two or more people

COOPERATION: willingness to work with others

CRITICAL THINKING: analyzing an idea or situation in an organized, systematic manner

GLOSSARY OF PROBLEM-SOLVING TERMS

CRITICISM:	the act of making judgments
DECISION-MAKING:	the act of making up one's mind
DISCUSSING:	talking or writing about something; considering the pros and cons of an issue
EMPATHY:	the ability to understand a situation from another's point of view; being able to put oneself in another's shoes
FRUSTRATION:	prevention from achieving a goal
"I" LANGUAGE:	type of communication where the person speaking or writing admits the possibility of being wrong (Example: I'm not clear about your instructions...)
INTERPERSONAL:	between persons, e.g., interpersonal relationships
LISTENING:	making a conscious effort to hear
NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION:	given or exchanged information through the use of the body; without words

GLOSSARY OF PROBLEM-SOLVING TERMS

OPEN QUESTION: a question with many possible answers other than "yes" or "no"

PARAPHRASING: repeating the general idea of what someone else says to encourage the listener's understanding; a way of demonstrating empathy

PROBLEM-SOLVING: identifying a problem and solving it in a systematic manner

ROLE-PLAYING: assuming the role of a character in a simulation activity

TASK ANALYSIS: the breaking-up of a piece into parts to understand how it works

TEAMWORK: joint action by a group of people

WIN-WIN SOLUTION: success achieved by two (possibly opposing) parties

RESOURCES

Are You Communicating?
Donald Walton, McGraw-Hill: 1989

Communicating at Work
Ronald B. Adler, McGraw-Hill: 1992

Getting Past No: Negotiating Your Way from Confrontation to Cooperation
William Ury, Bantam: 1991

Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In
Roger Fisher and William Ury, Penguin: 1992

How to Speak, How to Listen
Mortimer Adler, McMillian: 1982

Systematic Problem Solving and Decision Making
Sandy Pokras, Crisp Publications, Inc. Los Altos, CA: 1989